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The Opinion Pages | EDITORIAL

# More Community Service, Not Less

By **THE EDITORIAL BOARD** JUNE 19, 2015

It would be hardhearted and counterproductive to squeeze any more money from the already meager federal funding for public service programs that help struggling schoolchildren, veterans, the elderly and communities stricken by natural disasters. Yet a House subcommittee this week approved a spending bill that cuts federal financing for the already beleaguered Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees many programs, the most well known of which is AmeriCorps.

Since its inception two decades ago, AmeriCorps has matched 900,000 Americans with nonprofit groups that are doing important work, like Teach for America, the American Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, Boys & Girls Clubs of America and United Way. In addition, this summer AmeriCorps teams will work in economically hard-hit cities and towns like Baltimore, Detroit and Ferguson, Mo., to clean up public lands, tutor children, repair homes and help keep food banks running.

AmeriCorps members receive a small stipend to help cover their living costs. After a year of full-time service, they receive a modest education award — \$5,645 — to put toward higher education or to pay off student loans. The budget for AmeriCorps, a modest \$665 million a year, more than pays for itself in terms of social benefits.

In addition to helping communities, the program gives young people a chance to perform rewarding work that often leads them into their careers. Studies show that the program expands the spirit of public service nationally: People in AmeriCorps for a year are subsequently more likely to volunteer in and become involved in the

communities they live in. The program is hugely popular. In a typical year, hundreds of thousands of people, mainly in their teens and 20s, apply for roughly 80,000 slots.

AmeriCorps was created in 1993 by President Bill Clinton and expanded under George W. Bush, who placed a high value on national service. The program has enjoyed strong, bipartisan support among mayors and county officials whose constituents have benefited from it. President Obama committed to making public service a central cause of his presidency during his first run for office. He signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009 — which passed with bipartisan support and called for gradually increasing AmeriCorps enrollment to 250,000 annual slots by 2017. Six years later, that promise remains unfulfilled — and Republican ideologues in Congress are still trying to kill off this relatively inexpensive but valuable program.

The proposed cuts, which would reduce the federal investment in the community service corporation by about a third, would gut valuable programs and shut down others altogether. Beyond that, thousands of teachers, tutors and mentors would be withdrawn from low-performing schools across the country. That's too big a price to pay for a savings so small that it doesn't even rate as a rounding error in the national budget. It's up to President Obama to fight for the national service program and make sure it remains intact.

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